

By MATTHEW KARNITSCHNIG



BELGRADE — Depending whom you ask, Aleksandar Vučić is either Serbia's last great hope to become a modern European democracy or a strongman-in-waiting whose autocratic tendencies threaten to destabilize the Balkans.

A one-time ultranationalist who played chess with the Bosnian Serb General Ratko Mladić and served as information minister under the nineties wartime leader Slobodan Milošević, the Serbian prime minister presents himself these days as a reformer committed to leading his country into the EU. Europe, tired of the turmoil that rocked the region for the better part of two decades, wants to believe him and has put Belgrade's membership application on the top of the accession pile.

Vučić is expected to emerge the clear victor in parliamentary elections later this month. The latest polls suggest his Serbian Progressive Party and its allies may even win an outright majority. The big question — for both the Balkans and Europe — is what he plans to do with that power.

His detractors warn that he is building an Orbán-like political machine at both the national and local level, quelling dissent by maintaining a tight grip on the country's media.

"What's his game? I don't know, but it's not good for democracy in Serbia," said Jelena Milić, director of the Belgrade-based Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies, a liberal think tank.

Love him or hate him, it's difficult to deny that the 46-year-old Vučić has become the region's key political actor. By keeping a lid on regional tensions from Kosovo to Bosnia, Vučić has managed to win the confidence of key leaders in the U.S. and Europe.

'We are fed up with being the bad guys of the world'

During his visit to Berlin in September, Angela Merkel applauded Vučić's "courageous decisions" on Kosovo, adding that his openness to compromise had given Serbia's EU aspirations an "important impulse."

Sitting in his Belgrade office last week, Vučić, dressed casually in jeans and a sport coat over an open gingham shirt, returned the compliment. "I consider her to be the true leader of Europe and I'm not ashamed to say that," he said matter-of-factly.



During the lengthy discussion, Vučić, an imposing figure of about two meters, appeared both confident and relaxed. Time and again, he insisted that his only agenda was to firmly anchor Serbia in Europe.

"My political philosophy is to bring the economy to the top of our priorities, which means to have political stability to do all necessary reforms," he said.

Nationalist roots

Nearly 20 years after NATO bombs rained on Belgrade, the country's economy remains weak. Economic output per head was just above \$5,000 in 2015, putting Serbia, a country of just over 7 million, alongside the likes of Iraq and Libya. Amid the Balkan wars and persistent domestic tensions, Serbia's economy never completed the transition from the communism of the Yugoslav period to a market economy. Unemployment is about 20 percent and the state sector remains the dominant employer in the country. Though the government is in the process of privatizing state-owned companies, many are too inefficient to attract buyers.

Nonetheless, Serbia has made progress in restructuring its economy to bring its debt under control in recent years, winning high marks from the International Monetary Fund and others. Economic growth, at 0.8 percent last year, is modest but has beat expectations. If all goes according to plan, the economy should grow by more than 2 percent this year, Vučić predicts, above the IMF's forecast of 1.75 percent.

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